

Realism & Photojournalism

How Berthold Brecht's quote on realism is interpreted in Tim Hetherington's war photography and Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin's exploration of war.

Abstract

The concept of realism has been discussed by knowledgeable writers, bright philosophers, and sophisticated intellectuals in the past, among others, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht thought intensively about the concept of realism, how it is perceived by the masses and how it changes over time. Brecht's quote is a personal statement. It is politically motivated, as Brecht was himself. In the following essay, the quote will be adapted to documentary photography and photojournalism. Originally it refers to literature, although Brecht wrote extensively about photography and its effects on the real world, so it might not be too far-fetched.

"With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master ... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions" (Brecht 1938).

There will be blood. Hetherington's work displays U.S. soldiers in Korangal Valley, which was considered one of the most fiercely contested areas of the war in Afghanistan. This essay will focus on Hetherington's series "Sleeping Soldiers", which he photographed while staying in outposts in the Korangal Valley.

There will be light. Broomberg & Chanarin recorded the project “The Day Nobody Died”, which captured the reality at the front line of Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in a particular and unique way. It turned out that the month Broomberg & Chanarin stayed in Helmand Province would have been the deadliest of the war. Broomberg & Chanarin¹ “approached the Ministry of Defence and lied to them, claiming [they] were photojournalists” (Tate 2015).

This essay will explore and explain in more detail what might be the intentions of both projects, and how Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin define realism for themselves, and what it says about the reality of the war in Afghanistan.

One might not agree with the adopted attitude in the project of Broomberg & Chanarin. Odd, superficial, critical, or spectacular. But it can be agreed that it opens space for discussion and challenges gridlocked ideas of the concept of realism, and as Steve Jobs said: “You can [...] glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things.”

One has to admit that in recent years the same aesthetic conflict photographs have been used in different wars. *The Day Nobody Died* cannot be easily transferred to another war. Still the project relies heavily on its concept and can not live a semi-independent life. Hetherington’s *Sleeping Soldiers*, on the other hand, is accessible by the wide masses and extracts itself from the claim to be for the elite. It displays the world as it is understood, and it is seen in the news.

The project is open to the people.

¹ In this essay Broomberg & Chanarin are referred to as photographers or photojournalists, as that is what they told the Ministry of Defence, rather than saying they are artists, how they refer to themselves on their homepage.

Berthold Brecht's quote translated into these two projects wants to explain the concept of realism, and how seemingly obvious realities might look different from other angles. Brecht had a political motivation, so had Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin. This is important to keep in mind, to understand their concept of reality.